

Thoroughly Postmodern Ralph

A Commentary on Scholar-Practitioner

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Abstract

In the postmodern conceptual framework that informs this commentary, both teacher and student are seen as scholar-practitioners. To meet the scholar-practitioner's goal of connecting theory and practice, teaching and learning are considered to be necessary and inseparable acts. Teacher and student are mutually engaged as *bricoleurs* (Levi-Strauss, 1966)—professional do-it-yourselfers—who extract and apply the right tools for the job of constructing schooling from a cache of diverse ideas. The scholar-practitioner dyad is both reflexive and reflective, seizing a teachable moment, and replicating its found strategies in future lessons. The author provides an example of postmodern scholar-practitioner from her experience as a special education teacher, wherein a teachable moment led to undreamt-of possibilities for both teacher and student. Deconstruction of current metanarratives regarding disability and special education are discussed, and questions are posed for future deconstruction of positivist paradigms.

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reflective, seizing a teachable moment, and replicating its found strategies in future lessons. Consider the following example.

It was my first year as a scholar-practitioner of “special” education. My high school students, a paraeducator, and I were concealed behind a wobbly partition and several sheets of taped-up black construction paper, in a “self-contained life skills classroom.” We were taking up valuable space the principal had claimed for us from the domain of a veteran content mastery teacher. The first time we passed through this teacher’s truncated classroom on our way to contain ourselves, she dropkicked a wastebasket.

We were so contained; we had to back a student’s wheelchair out of the “room” to turn it around. We were so contained; our partition crept slowly and relentlessly inward, like a dungeon wall in a dark fairy tale. On Mondays I’d come in early to move it back out. I misspent time and energy that way, moving symbolic and physical walls back and forth, mere inches at a time. It was my student Sylvia who made the walls come down.

Sylvia was a 15-year-old girl with qualifying labels of mental retardation and Down syndrome. It hadn’t been easy to persuade administrators to change Sylvia’s placement from middle school to high school. When they finally relented, they cautioned me that she was “still awfully small for her age.”

And so she was. Sylvia was about the size of a 10-year-old. She staggered up the steps of the school bus, nearly toppled by her laptop communication device, a backpack stuffed with books she couldn’t read, and fragile works of art involving macaroni, glitter, or clay. As I steadied her and passed her on to the bus driver, I pictured the sign on the entrance of the roller coaster at our county fair, “WARNING. If you are too small to reach this bar, you are too small to ride this ride!”

Was Sylvia too small for my classroom as well? Did the principal see our little dungeon as an education roller coaster, with breathtaking heights and depths? It was a gratifying possibility; and Sylvia was no stranger to risk and excitement. She’d encountered plenty of living and working on a ranch with her mother, brother, sister, and grandma.

One day, while everyone else was out in the fields, Sylvia prepared a complete, balanced meal for her family. She set the table, with silverware and napkins all in their proper places. According to her mother, Sylvia had rarely rattled a pot before that day.

Mom’s theory was that Sylvia spent a lot of time getting ready to learn, and then she leaped to mastery. Although she’d shown no classic signs of emergent literacy, Mom said Sylvia was getting ready to read. At the intersection of theory and practice, I stood both poised and puzzled. I’d just completed a behaviorist-oriented special education master’s program, so I felt a theoretic urge to observe and measure something. I decided to produce a comprehensive list of Sylvia’s expressive vocabulary. With a battery of innovative lesson plans, high-tech and low-tech augmentative and alternative communication devices, and rewards both primary (burgers and fries) and secondary (verbal praise), Sylvia produced about 15

functional words. Most of them lingered shyly outside the framework of an actual sentence. “Coke.” “No.” “O.K.” “Mom.” In bursts of frustration, she’d delight me with three complete sentences: “Shut up!” “Don’t touch!” and “Go to your room!”

One day a “normal” student brought me a wide-eyed field mouse he’d tried to feed alive to a snake. The snake didn’t want it; but we did. In silent collaboration, Sylvia and I constructed a luxurious habitat for the mouse and placed it on her desk. Clever as the mythical mice in those unreadable books Mom tucked in Sylvia’s backpack, our class mouse opened his tiny cork door and escaped.

He ping-ponged around the room! The paraeducator screamed! As we scrambled to catch him, Sylvia burst into eloquence, “He’s mine! He’s mine! Here! Here! No, no! Careful! He’s mine! Get back! Look out! Get away!”

When the mouse was self-contained again, I asked Sylvia to name him. “Ralph,” she said. Mom said they didn’t know any Ralphs. She’d never heard Sylvia say “Ralph” before. The next day we mainstreamed Ralph. We enrolled him in the world of adolescent boys, hungry snakes, and other local wildlife. In the week following Ralph’s emancipation, Sylvia read her first printed word: “mouse.”

Ever since, as a scholar-practitioner of special education, this is my philosophy: One’s task, as a teacher of children with “severe” disabilities, is to tenderly balance the structure, predictability, and security of keeping Ralph in, with the thrilling, unfettered possibility of letting Ralph out.

Postmodern Ralph

Ralph was both a mouse and a metaphor. As a mouse, he was simply a mouse. As a metaphor, he was the postmodern condition: the unexpected, unpredictable, little fact that is capable of gnawing holes in great, global narratives of educational theory and practice.

Postmodern Condition

When Lyotard (1984) sought to translate “the postmodern condition” (p. 3), he began by defining modernism. Modern society, said Lyotard, was dependent on “metanarratives” (p. 35)—grand stories by which a culture defined and perpetuated its values and practices. Lyotard saw the work of postmodernism as the critical deconstruction of these metanarratives. Derrida (1997) defined the process:

Deconstruction is the act of opening, exposing, expanding, and complexifying, toward releasing unheard-of, undreamt-of possibilities to come. The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things—texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need—do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. (Derrida, 1997, p. 31)

Ralph led Sylvia and me to exceed our boundaries. He was our undreamt-of possibility. For Sylvia, he deconstructed 15 years of hopeful but as yet ineffective reading instruction. For me, he deconstructed the confining structure of behaviorist pedagogy. Sylvia and I, with our scaffolds to accountability in splinters, flew there instead. Even more undreamt-of possibilities followed in Ralph's tiny footsteps.

Capitalizing on her new reputation as a breakthrough scholar, Sylvia was invited to participate in a high school algebra class, where she planned and participated in her own version of differentiated instruction, while her teachers and fellow students observed and praised her success. She kept a meticulous notebook, discovered the visual and tactual pleasures of a calculator, and copied formulas from the board. Her artwork, traditionally a series of lone self-portraits, began to portray groups of girls with cats-eye glasses like Sylvia's and various two-digit numbers on their chests. One day she walked into class, sat down, and drew the coordinate plane with plot points.

In her role as a scholar-practitioner, Sylvia deconstructed learning itself, expanding and complexifying its meaning and its missions. She assumed a leadership role in curriculum and instruction, while I, as the "teacher of record," developed the courage to follow her through wondrous mouse-holes in prevailing paradigms. Emulating Sylvia's example, there are many other boundaries that postmodern scholar-practitioners may expand, complexify, and exceed.

Postmodern Scholar-Practitioners

Although they may not specifically claim allegiance to postmodernism, leading scholar-practitioners have deconstructed metanarratives of education research, theory, and practice. Waite (2004) declared that "ideologically driven policies and practices—[in other words, metanarratives]—encroach upon nearly every aspect of our lives" (p. 4). He called for a deconstruction of the metanarrative that positivist, quantitative knowledge is the highest form of truth. Waite cautioned that forcing this ideology upon educational researchers could "subjugate" (p. 3) our scholarship.

Cochran-Smith (1991, 2001) called for preparing student teachers to "teach against the grain" (1991, p. 279), by deconstructing underlying assumptions about knowledge, power, and language in teaching. She described two ways that teacher preparation programs can prepare teachers to "reclaim their roles in the shaping of practice, by taking a stand as both educators and activists" (1991, p. 280).

The "critical dissonance" (Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 281) approach prepares student teachers to critically examine and analyze disconnections between scholarship and practice in the field. The "collaborative resonance" (p. 282) approach brings student and veteran teachers together in a learning community, to deconstruct, analyze, synthesize, and transform university-based scholarship and school-based practice. More recently, Cochran-Smith has advocated teaching

against a “new grain of standardized practices that treat teachers as interchangeable parts—and worse—reinscribe social inequities” (2001, p. 2).

Darling-Hammond (2004) deconstructed the metanarrative of standards-based education reform, and found “unintended consequences that undermine access to education for low-achieving students rather than enhancing it” (p. 1047).

Hargreaves (2004) and Brantlinger (2003) deconstructed the metanarratives of equity in school improvement and school failure. They found these metanarratives to be constructed in ways that perpetuated inequity. Hargreaves (2004) problematized the equity metanarrative of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). He suggested that “distinction and disgust” had become “the alter egos of school improvement.” School failure was “defined, evaluated and dealt with in ways that function[ed] to evoke the disgust of the affluent, which simultaneously remind[ed] them of their own fortunate distinction” (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 27).

Differentiating [intervention] strategies for low and high performing schools may create what I call an *apartheid of improvement*—dealing only with the *effects* of low capacity and low investment in poor communities in ways that perpetuate their restricted capacity . . . instead of attacking the roots of impoverishment and inequitable support. . . . (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 32)

Brantlinger’s (2003) deconstructive ethnography of affluent mothers, school personnel, and board members in a Midwestern urban school district revealed that middle class parents were controlling and defining education, not just for their own children, but for poor children too. The metanarratives employed by the mothers in Brantlinger’s study covered up inequities of power and influence.

These affluent mothers, powerful members of the community in terms of their impact on the nature of local schooling, explained away or rationalized class-related material or faculty differences in local schools. It was convenient not to notice inequities. (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 55)

Smith (1999) deconstructed the mental retardation label in special education. She found that teachers’ low expectations for students who bore this label were directly shaping students’ academic performance in the classroom. The metanarrative that portrays persons with mental retardation as perpetually childlike (Wehmeyer, 2000) was a likely contributor to Sylvia’s placement in middle school, when such a placement was no longer age-appropriate. In fact, mental retardation was just one of the powerful medical/scientific metanarratives that held Sylvia back and limited her opportunities to interact with her same-age peers.

Postmodern Disability

Perhaps the most powerful medical/scientific metanarrative in special education is the overarching construct of “disability.” “Severe” disability can be viewed on a continuum, from justified euthanasia (Singer, 1993), to a vision of “a social environment where to be legless is [not abnormal, or normal, but] irrelevant” (Oliver, 1978, p. 137, as cited in Oliver, 1996, p. 96). Though widely opposed, these metanarratives are all based on deficits.

Singer (1993) located this deficit in the disabled individual. He declared that “seriously disabled” human infants, and “older children or adults whose mental age is and has always been that of an infant” (p. 181) were human beings. But they were not persons. Personhood required “rationality, autonomy, [and] self-consciousness” (p. 182), which Singer claimed persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities could not attain. He justified the killing of an infant “born with a serious disability” because the infant’s parents “may, with good reason, regret that a disabled child was ever born” (p. 183). If the child [with a disability] could be “replaced,” (p. 186) by a healthy child who would have “better prospects” (p. 185) for a happier life, Singer said, “it would be right to kill him.” Singer insisted that the lives of disabled people were “less worth living” (p. 188) than the lives of people who were not disabled.

The medical metanarrative of disability is also focused on individual pathology (Johnson, 2003; Mairs, 1996; Mitchell, 2002; Oliver, 1996; Smith, 1999; Ware, 2002). Persons with disabilities are identified and described by specific symptoms and syndromes that represent dis-ease and limitations, with a goal of curing or “fixing” that which is “narrated outside the norm” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 17; Smith, 1999).

Linda Ware (2002), whose son Justin was diagnosed with cerebral palsy-like symptoms a few months after his birth, described her encounter with this medical metanarrative through the lens of her experience as an educator, researcher, and disability rights activist. Immediately after the diagnosis, Ware said, her baby became “‘obviously blighted’ ‘defective’ and ‘damaged’—marked by his medical fate. . . .” Ware’s (2002) neurosurgeon did not recommend euthanasia. He advised institutionalization. “In an ordinary and matter-of-fact tone, he said, ‘Given your age, this event could spoil the rest of your life’” (p. 147).

Oliver (1996) is widely credited with articulating the social metanarrative of disability. Oliver located the deficit within society. He saw the medical model as just one component of a construct he called “medicalisation” (p. 31). Oliver described the foundation of medicalisation as a “personal tragedy theory” of disability—the idea that “disability is some terrible chance event which occurs at random to unfortunate individuals.” Oliver (who has a disability) claimed, “nothing could be further from the truth” (p. 32).

It is not individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem, but society’s failure to provide appropriate services and adequately

ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organization. (Oliver, 1996, p. 32)

Among these competing definitions of disability, it is the medical metanarrative that prevails in U.S. schools and special education (Grenot-Scheyer, Fisher, & Staub, 2001; Skrtic, 1991a).

Postmodern Special Education

Students are placed in special education based upon a battery of assessments. They “qualify” for special education services if their intelligence falls below a “normal” range, and their medical “abnormalities” require “interventions.” Although current definitions of disabilities have evolved to more functional categorizations, students are still defined and tracked by specific medical diagnoses. Autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, spina bifida, deaf-blindness, sickle cell anemia, Down syndrome, and mental retardation are some of the most generally recognized developmental disabilities, and are labeled as such for the purpose of providing special education services (Westling & Fox, 2004).

Ware (2002) deconstructed entrenched perceptions about disability among school professionals, students, and their families. She found that these perceptions shaped and preserved a school culture in which disability was neither understood, nor valued, nor taught, and inclusive education often amounted to nothing more than physical relocation.

Postmodern Inclusion

Inclusive education is a contentiously constructed phenomenon, subject to an “endlessly repeated play of dominations” (Foucault, 1971/1984, p. 85) among various defining discourses and disciplines. Seemingly irresolvable tensions exist between equity and excellence (Hargreaves, 2004; Skrtic, 1991b), between civil rights ideals and pragmatic practices (Erevelles, 2000; Kavale, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Skrtic, 1991a; Society for Disability Studies, n.d.), and between standards-based education reform and the call for collaborative, multicultural learning communities (Artiles, 2003; Pajak, 2001; Skrtic, 1991b).

Since the enactment of Public Law 94–142 in 1975 (now the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act* [IDEA]), the United States government has required public school students with all types of disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment—“to the maximum extent possible . . . with children who do not have disabilities” (*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 1993, 20 U.S.C., section 1412 [5] [B]). The percentage of students with disabilities placed in K–12 regular classrooms for at least 80% of the day increased between 1988–1989 and 1998–1999. But the smallest increase occurred among students with multiple disabilities, from only 7% to 11% (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2004). Even in schools where students with disabilities are included in general education, the practice may entail “little more than the relocation of disabled students into general education classrooms” (Ware, 2002, p. 154). It appears that students with mental retardation and developmental disabilities are destined to remain, literally and epistemologically, in a class by themselves.

However, even the most dominant meanings that have been constructed can be deconstructed, if educators will turn their attention to the task. Can we learn to re-define and re-imagine disability as something other than a tragic collection of symptoms, prohibitions, and limitations? Can we re-imagine the possibilities of disabled lives worth living? If the contribution of students with disabilities to school and society can be recognized and communicated, can educators’ resistance to inclusion be overcome? Can equity and excellence join forces to transform our schools?

Deconstructing the metanarratives of disability is a worthy goal for postmodern scholar-practitioners of special education. However, deconstruction and destruction are not synonymous. The postmodern scholar-practitioner of special education must function within prevailing metanarratives, while deconstructing them from the inside out. It is the work of scholar-practitioner to continually explore, expand, and facilitate the “unheard-of, undreamt-of possibilities” (Derrida, 1997, p. 31) that will transform education.

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